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SUBJECT: THAILAND: VIOLENCE IN THE SOUTH: VISIT TO SONGKHLA  
AND SATUN

REF: A. BANGKOK 1008  
[B](#). BANGKOK 3203

Classified By: Political Counselor Robert J. Clarke. Reason 1.4 (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Poloff visited the far southern province of Songkhla and the Muslim majority province of Satun May 23-24. Satun province has avoided the violence plaguing the three other Muslim majority Thai provinces despite a similar population and geographical location. A separate historical identity and more widespread use of the Thai language may explain to some degree why Satun has thus far managed to avoid the increasing levels of violence experienced by its neighbors. Local observers believe that the overall level of violence in the South will continue to rise due to a widely alienated populace -- potentially spreading to Songkhla or further north -- but cautioned against overstating the role of separatist groups. END SUMMARY

[1](#)2. (SBU) On May 23-24 Poloff visited the far southern provinces of Songkhla and Satun, including border crossing areas with Malaysia. In Songkhla Poloff met with Dr. Suttiwong Phongphaibun, Advisor to the Thaksin Institute for Southern Thai Studies and Somphong Jutansuan, Chairman of the Law Society of Thailand in southern Thailand. In Satun, he met with Ibrahim Adam, Chairman of the Satun Islamic Committee; Thanwakom Kamasiri, Satun Vice Governor for Security; Gen. Tanacharoen Suvanno, Satun Provincial Police Commander; and Wongwut Chumthong, Chairman of the Satun Journalists Association.

BACKGROUND: SATUN - A DIFFERENT HISTORICAL LEGACY

[1](#)3. (U) Satun is a majority Muslim, ethnically Malay province, which along with Songkhla, Narathiwat, Yala and Pattani makes up the Thai border area with Malaysia. Many of the ethnically Malay population of Satun speak Yawi, not Thai, as a primary language. Satun, like Narathiwat and Songkhla provinces, shares commercially valuable border crossing points into Malaysia. Despite these similarities, Satun has somehow avoided much of the episodic violence which has afflicted the other far southern provinces of Thailand over the past one hundred years, and has been notably quiet since the accelerated pace of violence seen since January [1](#)2004.

[1](#)4. (U) Satun -- like the neighboring provinces of Narathiwat, Yala and Pattani -- shares historical ties with the northern Malaysian states. However, unlike those other provinces which were part of the Sultanate of Pattani prior to absorption into the Thai Kingdom; Satun was the northernmost region of the Sultanate of Kedah. While the rest of Kedah was eventually ceded to the British, and eventually became part of Malaysia, Satun was split off, and became a Thai province.

[1](#)5. (SBU) The environment in Satun is very different from its neighboring provinces. There are no heavily armed police or military patrols or roadblocks -- all too common sights in Narathiwat, Pattani, and Yala -- and no obvious military presence. The land and sea border points are quiet, with minimal traffic, and no additional security is visible on either the Thai or Malaysian side of the border. In Satun city the streets remain full at night, in stark contrast to Narathiwat where shopkeepers close early in order to be home before dark.

SATUN - WHY NO VIOLENCE?

[1](#)6. (U) There have been varying explanations as to why Satun has avoided the violence that has plagued the rest of the South. Satun has a relatively smaller Muslim population compared to Yala, Narathiwat, and Pattani and a slightly higher percentage of non-Muslims among its total population. Satun's historical separation from the Kingdom of Pattani, around which most of the separatist propaganda revolves, appears to also be an important factor (NOTE: Separatists usually include Satun in calls for a Pattani State despite these historical differences. END NOTE)

[1](#)7. (C) Language appears to be a crucial factor. Ibrahim Adam from the Satun Islamic Committee said that while many

ethnically Malay Muslims speak Yawi, Thai is more widely used, even at the village level. Satun Police Commander Tanacharoen Suvanno and Vice Governor Thanwakom agreed that the widespread use of Thai played a key role in the militant's lack of influence in the province. Both noted that militants rely on Yawi speaking communities to establish networks, and thus found it more difficult to operate in Satun and in other more northern regions of Thailand.

18. (C) The mutual mistrust between the Muslim community and Thai security forces which is readily apparent in much of the South is not visible in Satun. Ibrahim Adam said his Islamic Committee -- and the local village Imams -- maintained good relationships with local security officials and that a high level of trust had been established between the Islamic Committee and the provincial government.

#### OVERALL SITUATION IN THE SOUTH - DOWNWARD TRAJECTORY?

19. (C) In our conversations, we heard concern that the overall situation in southern Thailand is continuing to deteriorate, and worries that the violence could soon spread to other provinces, like Satun, which have thus far been able to avoid bloodshed. Dr. Suttiwong Phongphaibun, former advisor to the now disbanded Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center (SBPAC) and Somphong Jutansuan, Chairman of the Law Society of Thailand in southern Thailand -- both lifetime residents of the South -- said the overall violence in the South is the worst seen in their lifetime. Suttiwong and Somphong specifically cited the deteriorating relationship between the Buddhist and Muslim communities as a cause for concern. Suttiwong claimed that some local Muslim leaders have in recent months been highlighting religious differences between the Buddhist and Muslim communities.

110. (C) NOTE: Post has reported on anecdotal evidence that significant numbers of the non-Muslim population of southern Thailand is abandoning the region out of fear, and that Muslim militants appear to be deliberately intimidating the non-Muslim populace through various means. Some reports (ref:tel A) suggest that as many as 100,000 non-Muslims have fled the southernmost three provinces over the past year. A recent census, conducted in Yala City, seems to give some credence to these reports. The census shows the city's population has dropped by 12,000 from March of 2004 to March of 2005. END NOTE

#### NO NEW EVIDENCE OF TRANSNATIONAL GROUPS INVOLVEMENT

11. (C) None of our interlocutors reported any new evidence of the involvement of transnational groups in the violence in the South. Vice Governor Thanwakom said Thai militants are copying the techniques used by transnational terrorists -- especially bombings -- but that the practice in itself is not an indication of the presence of foreign terrorists since the knowledge is readily available. (NOTE: A report produced by the Southern Border Provinces Peace Building Command (SBPPC) in May said 65 bombs attacks have occurred in the far South over the past six months. END NOTE)

#### ROLE OF THE SEPARATIST GROUPS - EXAGGERATED?

112. (C) During discussions regarding the major factors behind the recent upsurge in the violence, several of our interlocutors downplayed the role of the southern separatist groups. Dr. Suttiwong and Somphong Jutansuan argued that southern separatist groups were more influential in southern Thailand 20 years ago, and did not enjoy current widespread support. Several of our interlocutors described the separatist groups as having little "street credibility" among the populace; and said that most Muslims did not believe that complete autonomy would solve their problems. Vice Governor Thanwakom said the core numbers of hard-core separatist remained small. He believes that the separatists themselves rarely conduct attacks, and instead rely on hired gunmen -- usually disaffected youths -- to conduct drive-by shootings and arson. Dr. Suttiwong is worried that the government is exaggerating the role of the separatists in a similar fashion to security forces in the 1970s which labeled people as "Communists" for voicing any grievances against the government.

113. (C) As in past visits, many of our interlocutors complained that the media greatly exaggerated the level of separatist related violence by lumping all incidents in the South under "separatist related." Somphong said that while the strength of the formal separatist movement is exaggerated, the animosity felt by the population in the South toward the central government should not be underestimated. Somphong cautioned that the deeply felt anger towards and suspicion of the central authorities by much of the Muslim population in the South created the environment in which the small group of separatists could operate freely.

#### COMMENT: WILL THE VIOLENCE SPREAD TO SATUN?

114. (C) While the bloodshed has not yet spread to Satun;

many observers we spoke with were concerned that Satun might not be able to escape the violence that plagues its neighboring provinces. Vice Governor Thanwakom spoke optimistically about an RTG strategy to use Satun and Songkhla as "a wall" to keep the violence contained to the far South. But it was obvious during the meeting with Thanwakom and others that they are deeply concerned that it is only a matter of time before the violence spreads.

15. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: The connection of "separatism" in the South to the many reported incidents of violence in the region is often exaggerated, especially by the Bangkok press. Yet the analysis in some official Thai circles seems to be hardening around the assessment that the separatist groups are the core factor behind the violence. Our view is that we should be cautious about overstating the importance of separatist or Islamist groups on the ground -- although it continues to be difficult to identify who is responsible for the mounting violence. It is worth noting that when local people in the South discuss the ongoing violence, separatism is not often cited as a reason for the attacks, and locals are often dismissive of the capabilities of the known separatist groups. Southern Thais are much more likely to blame the violence on infighting between security forces, turf battles between smugglers, or the U.S. Government (reftel B) rather than connect the violence to the separatist movement. However, what clearly cannot be overstated is the grassroots dissatisfaction or genuine anger and resentment among many southerners towards the central government. If the RTG cannot address the basic sense of "injustice" in the South the violence could spread to Satun and other parts of Thailand. END COMMENT  
BOYCE